

The Unabomber's Latent Anarchism

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September 20, 2024

Theodore John Kaczynski, better known as “The Unabomber,” was a domestic terrorist, mathematician, philosopher, and, potentially, an anarchist theorist. For this paper, anarchism refers to the social and political theory popularized during the 19th and early 20th centuries that seeks to abolish the state and hierarchical systems, typically capitalism, due to their inherently oppressive nature while ultimately striving toward re-asserting the “natural man” within a more simplified society.¹ While this definition is incomprehensive and does not account for the intricacies of some anarchist theorist’s philosophies, it does, however, provide a general framework to which Kaczynski’s actions and writings may be compared.

There are three critical periods in Kaczynski’s life, his early years in the Montana wilderness, his bombing campaign, and his jail term that offer the most insight into his potential anarchist sympathies. Though Kaczynski never cited classical anarchist theorists as inspirations for his acts of terror, he did, however, describe himself as practicing a “particular brand of anarchism” in his manifesto, though he never specifies what exactly this anarchism was.² Hence, this paper will search for some of Kaczynski’s “anarchistic sympathies” within his writings and life choices to determine the extent to which his actions and theories about human society could be described as anarchistic or fully anarchist.

Born in 1942 in Chicago, Illinois, Kaczynski spent much of his early childhood as an outsider due to his highly advanced intelligence and proficiency in the field of mathematics.³ As such, Kaczynski would go on to rise quickly through the ranks of academia and would enroll at Harvard at the age of 16, earn a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1967, and spend a few years as a professor at the University of California Berkeley before resigning from his post.⁴ It is at this point in Kaczynski’s life that his potential anarchistic sympathies seemingly began to develop as he retreated from society in 1971 to live a primitive lifestyle on a small patch of wilderness in Lincoln, Montana.⁵

By his move to Montana in 1971, Kaczynski had already become very disgruntled with modern American life and consumerism, leading him to give it all away in search of a more purposeful existence not motivated by greed or exploitation.⁶ During this time, Kaczynski lived a deliberate lifestyle reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond, in which he built an identical cabin to Thoreau using the so-called “pioneer plan.”⁷ This initial move to step away from organized society in search of a more primordial existence is the first real example of Kaczynski’s innate desire to

¹ Horowitz, Irving Louis. *The Anarchists*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017: 17.

² Kaczynski, Ted. “The Unabomber Manifesto: Industrial Society and Its Future”. Washington, D.C.: *The Washington Post*, 1995: note 34.

³ Graysmith, Robert. *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*. Regnery Pub., 1997: 61.

⁴ *Ibid*, 21; 25; 54.

⁵ *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*, 34.

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ *Ibid*, 34–35.

find the natural way of living free from oppression or hierarchies. Or, to put it more succinctly, Kaczynski's move to the wilderness in 1971 was the first glimpse of his latent anarchistic sympathies.

During his early years in Montana, the closest theoretical corollary to Kaczynski would likely be one of the anarchist or anarchistic American thinkers like Thoreau or Emerson. This is primarily because Kaczynski spent nearly two decades in his cabin living off the land, eating what he killed, and ultimately severing himself from the rest of organized society, much like Thoreau did at his Walden Pond cabin from 1845–1847.⁸ Though neither Thoreau nor Emerson were entirely anarchistic philosophers, they did hold views about society that overlap with earlier anarchists like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Peter Kropotkin. For example, Thoreau and Emerson strongly believed in the value of developing a well-rounded man by living a deliberate, moderate, simple, and impoverished lifestyle.⁹

Moreover, Thoreau specifically believed that society, on the whole, should be simplified through this primitive way of living to uproot the “needless complexities of contemporary living,” which is why he made the move to Walden Pond to test out his theory.¹⁰ Thus, it could be said that Kaczynski and Thoreau moved away from society, though for different lengths of time, in search of what many classical anarchists like Bakunin, Malatesta, and Kropotkin fundamentally desired: re-establishing the “natural man.”¹¹ Though Kaczynski agrees with Thoreau and these classical anarchists on the necessity of returning to a more natural, anarchistic version of human society, he does not devise a socialist system for structuring this society as many of the classical anarchists did.

Additionally, Thoreau's argument on deliberate living is akin to those posited by earlier anarchist theorists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who deified poverty as the “state in which a man gains by his work enough for his needs.”¹² Given this alignment between Thoreau and Proudhon, one would struggle to reject the statement that this simplistic and naturalistic way of life is anarchistic, thereby indicating that Kaczynski's lifestyle during this early period was certainly in step with the beliefs of anarchist philosophers. Though Kaczynski's journal during the early 1970s does not demonstrate any direct influence from Thoreau or Emerson, one visitor to his cabin at that time does recall seeing some of Thoreau's novels on his bookshelf, indicating Kaczynski was most likely aware of Thoreau's belief in the sanctifying nature of primitive living.¹³ So, in terms of this piece's working definition of anarchism, Kaczynski's primitive lifestyle and probable incorporation of Thoreau's views of the sanctity of deliberate living

⁸ Ibid, 34.

⁹ Woodcock, George. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. University of Toronto Press, 2009: 389.

¹⁰ Ibid, 390.

¹¹ Horowitz, 17.

¹² Ibid, 26.

¹³ *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*, 37.

into his political worldview are evidence that Kaczynski held the anarchistic belief of returning the “natural man” within a simplified society.

From 1971–1978, Kaczynski spent essentially all of his time living off the land in this Walden-like lifestyle with very few ventures into the nearby town of Lincoln to gather supplies “once or twice a month” or to deliver his mail bombs in various cities across the nation.¹⁴ While Kaczynski’s life was sedentary during this seven-year stretch compared to his late years, he did, however, appear to undergo a radical change in his theories about society and technology after he read the works of Jacques Ellul. The self-proclaimed Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul and his book *The Technological Society* effectively served as “Ted’s Bible” during this period due to its profound impact on Kaczynski’s lifestyle and its evident influence on his later views about the deplorable nature of technology.¹⁵ In *The Technological Society*, Ellul defines the dominant force of society as “technique” or efficiency and comes to conclude that this drive for efficiency by modern society has entrapped humans in an unnatural cycle of progress.¹⁶

To Kaczynski, an individual who, by 1971, had already shown a desire to escape modernity into the wilderness, this threat of “technique” certainly appeared as an impenetrable “industrial-technological system” that would eventually “permanently reduce human beings...to engineered products.”¹⁷ In Kaczynski’s eyes, this reduction of humanity began as a result of “modern industrial society” overcomplicating our social order and causing us to lose sight of how society should be structured: in “natural small-scale communities such as the extended family, the village or the tribe.”¹⁸ While Kaczynski and Ellul’s arguments may appear somewhat dissonant from earlier anarchistic thinkers, interpreting their concepts of technology, efficiency, and natural societies like previous anarchists perceived the state highlights some overlaps in their philosophical frameworks. For example, one of the foremost anarchists, Bakunin, characterizes the danger of the state nearly identically to how Kaczynski describes technology, saying, “Universal peace will be impossible, so long as the present centralized state exists.”¹⁹ This comparison between Bakunin’s and Kaczynski’s theories is all the more apparent when one realizes that the two did not just identify the detrimental results of technology and the state but, as noted above, asserted a return to a more fundamental and natural state of living as the solution to these issues. Thus, it could be said that Kaczynski’s desire for a return to a primitive, more naturalistic living in response to an oppressive technological system is similar enough to Bakunin and other anarchist’s reactions to the oppressive state, meaning that one could rea-

¹⁴ Ibid, 42.

¹⁵ Chase, Alston. *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003: 332.

¹⁶ Ellul, Jacques, John Wilkinson, and Robert King Merton. *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967: 4.

¹⁷ “The Unabomber Manifesto,” 1.

¹⁸ Ibid, 47.

¹⁹ Woodcock, 137.

sonably consider Kaczynski's proposed solutions for these technological problems as anarchistic.

Now that it has been established that Kaczynski's abhorrence for technology is, at the very least, similar to earlier anarchists' disdain for the state, it must now be investigated whether the means Kaczynski used to achieve his desired end were anarchistic in nature. But, before delving into Kaczynski's bombing campaign and the potential similarity of his actions to earlier anarchists, it must be noted that Kaczynski's attacks may have been inspired by his intellectual muse, Jacques Ellul. In another one of his books, *Anarchy and Christianity*, Ellul defined anarchy as "an absolute rejection of violence," but this does not mean he fully discarded the practice.²⁰ In fact, Ellul outlined three cases in which he believed the use of violence was explicable: when using force would dissuade future authoritarianism or oppression, when violence is truly a last resort, and when violence may be used to highlight the fragility of the social ties which bind us.²¹ Crucially, however, Ellul stressed in the book that he mainly opposed violence for Christian and social justice reasons, but Kaczynski, a noted atheist and critic of progressivism, would have no reason, given Ellul's logic, to accept these rebuttals.²²

This seemingly contradictory conception of violent political action is not new to anarchist thought, with many previous thinkers in the discipline, such as Mikhail Bakunin, having condoned violence as a legitimate means for achieving an anarchist society. To Bakunin, the state was such an oppressive force that it needed to be completely eradicated, even if that meant violent, bloody means were implemented.²³ Thus, when Ted Kaczynski began his mail bombing campaign that spanned from 1978–1995, killing three and injuring twenty-three, his actions would not have been too far out of the realm of revolutionary anarchist action.²⁴ Moreover, his specific use of bombing attacks is incredibly reminiscent of an early American anarchist extremist Johann Most, who was active on the American anarchist scene during the late 19th century. For Most, revolutionary violence was so necessary that he went as far as writing a bomb-making pamphlet titled *Revolutionare Kriegswissenschaft*, which he distributed to his anarchist followers in the hopes they would target the political establishment.²⁵

Though incredibly extreme and somewhat subversive to the anarchist abhorrence toward violence, Kaczynski's bombing campaign cannot be described as wholly removed from the anarchist canon. As shown above, anarchists ranging from the more extreme revolutionaries like Most to widely-respected anarchist philosophers like Bakunin view violence against an oppressive force as generally justifiable when that force has deprived the common man, or "drudge people" as Bakunin calls it, from civilly resisting.²⁶ While

²⁰ *Anarchy and Christianity*, 11.

²¹ *Ibid*, 11–12.

²² *Ibid*, 12–13.

²³ Woodcock, 143.

²⁴ *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*, 223.

²⁵ Woodcock, 396.

²⁶ Horowitz, 123.

there are certainly similarities between Bakunin's, Most's, and Kaczynski's worldviews, it must, once again, be acknowledged that Kaczynski, unlike most anarchists, viewed technology as the main oppressive force needing to be rebelled against, not the state or some other hierarchical system.²⁷ Importantly, Kaczynski sent the majority of his bombs to individuals involved in technological industries, but he did send a few to people he knew personally during his past life in academia, meaning that his attacks were not entirely revolutionary.²⁸

In short, though Kaczynski's violent bombing campaign is not without some anarchistic precedence, the fact that his bombs were not solely directed at leaders in the tech industry means it would be disingenuous to claim his reign of terror was fully anarchistic due to the personal nature of some attacks. Thus, the Unabomber's attacks would have been more anarchistic had they been solely directed at figureheads of the technological orthodoxy, but because some were partially motivated by personal animosity, Kaczynski's campaign cannot be described as completely anarchistic.

After nearly two decades of sending mail bombs around the United States, Kaczynski was finally arrested in 1996 after his brother, David Kaczynski, recognized Ted's writing from the manifesto he sent to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.²⁹ The manifesto, titled "Industrial Society and Its Future," is a 35,000-word pronouncement of Kaczynski's political philosophy in which he stresses the deleterious effect of technology on society.³⁰ Though the manifesto covers all manner of subjects ranging from Kaczynski's critiques of late-20th century American politics to his retelling of the American Revolution, he spends the majority of the piece explaining the problem of technology and why a total revolution is necessary to rid the world of its negative influence on humanity and the environment. Despite this paper's earlier discussion of the similarities between the threats of technology and the state within the anarchist canon, Kaczynski's latter point on the environment is the most intriguing in terms of his possible anarchistic sentiments because he reiterated many arguments often attributed to so-called "green anarchists."

Green anarchism or eco-anarchism is an anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian doctrine that stresses environmental sustainability and the human need to connect and care for the natural world.³¹ Prominent green anarchists include Peter Kropotkin, who famously argued that an ideal anarchist society would have localized economies so individuals could connect with the natural world and finally have their needs wholly

²⁷ "The Unabomber Manifesto," 108.

²⁸ "Ted Kaczynski." Encyclopædia Britannica, November 11, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ted-Kaczynski>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "The Unabomber Manifesto," 1.

³¹ Levy, Carl, and Matthew S. Adams. *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 281–291.

satisfied.³² Kaczynski, in his manifesto, rephrases Kropotkin when he contends that “primitive societies provided a stable framework and therefore a sense of security” because they lived in harmony with the natural world instead of “dominating” it.³³ Though his manifesto does not critique authoritarianism and capitalism to the same extent as eco-anarchists like Kropotkin, Kaczynski does, however, make the distinctly eco-anarchistic argument that living in small communities surrounded by the natural world is a critical element of the human experience.³⁴

Thus, because his manifesto maintains this fundamental component of eco-anarchism without rejecting its other core tenets regarding anti-authoritarianism and anti-capitalism, it seems that Kaczynski could be assigned the label of primitive eco-anarchist or anarcho-primitivist. This “primitive eco-anarchist” moniker is more accurate than calling him a traditional anarchist because eco-anarchism’s foremost goal is to protect the environment so humankind may be enriched by it, unlike conventional anarchism, which primarily seeks to dismantle specific systems like the state or capitalism.³⁵ While his manifesto certainly concurs with many tenets of eco-anarchism, Kaczynski’s worldview, as presented in “Industrial Society and Its Future,” has one key difference: primitivism. The “primitive” portion of the label is very important to understanding the minutiae of Kaczynski’s philosophy because it highlights how he desired a return to a primitive society due to the ridiculousness and ineptitudes of modern societies, not simply because he wanted to protect the environment.³⁶

Before shifting away from the manifesto, it must be mentioned that “Industrial Society and Its Future” includes some arguments regarding labor that may help convince someone still on the fence about Kaczynski being a type of eco-anarchist. To Kaczynski, the “primitive man” was far more empowered than the “industrialized man” because he was able to interact with nature and learn the skills necessary to provide for himself.³⁷ This argument about the freeing potential of labor is quite similar to the argument that famed Christian anarchist Leo Tolstoy makes in *What Is to Be Done* when he contends that if men are to find labor to be “the essential thing and the joy of life,” then their labor must involve a “struggle with nature.”³⁸ For Tolstoy, this natural labor will be joyous because men will engage in “useful, pleasant, and easy work.”³⁹ Tolstoy’s conception of work is uniquely anarchistic because it fully rids labor of any potential for an oppressor to mandate that someone works in a manner they

³² Franks, Benjamin, Nathan J. Jun, and Leonard A. Williams. *Anarchism: A Conceptual Approach*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. 219–233.

³³ “The Unabomber Manifesto,” 49.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 45–49.

³⁵ Aaltola, Elisa. “Green Anarchy: Deep Ecology and Primitivism.” *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy*, 2010: 161–85.

³⁶ “The Unabomber Manifesto,” 197–199.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 198–199.

³⁸ Horowitz, 237.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

do not desire. Like Tolstoy in *What Is to Be Done*, Kaczynski believed natural labor equips primitive individuals with the tools needed to provide for their necessities so they may be secure and prosperous within their simplified societies.⁴⁰ Thus, because Kaczynski and Tolstoy agree on the empowering and freeing characteristics of natural, skill-based labor, and Tolstoy's system of labor is undoubtedly anarchistic, Kaczynski's conception of labor could be described as anarchistic.

Now, after the 1996 arrest, Kaczynski went through a series of trials before eventually receiving life without parole on January 22, 1998.⁴¹ While in prison, Kaczynski conducted various interviews and responded to letters from individuals curious about his motives and the arguments he presented in "Industrial Society and Its Future." Surprisingly, Kaczynski was directly asked in one of these letters what his opinion of the "anarchists, green-anarchists, and anarcho-primitivists" was, but he, unfortunately, deflected by saying each movement would be hijacked by the ruling class to "protect the techno industrial system."⁴²

Thus, there is no way to truly know whether Kaczynski identified with anarcho-primitivism despite this essay arguing that his beliefs were typical of that philosophy. In another, unrelated interview between Kaczynski and the John Jay Sentinel, Kaczynski finally confronts capitalism head-on when the interview asks him to what extent he believes capitalism encourages technological development, a process Kaczynski clearly reviles.⁴³ Kaczynski clearly answers that he believes capitalism is more responsible than any other economic system for technological development but that it would not be worthwhile to destroy capitalism because centralization, through government action, is most responsible for technology's advance.⁴⁴ This final point about the necessity of destroying governments and centralization to achieve his desired society is undoubtedly Kaczynski's most anarchistic belief, which confirms when read in accordance with the rest of this paper's evidence, that Kaczynski's worldview is that of a violent anarcho-primitivist.

After nearly three decades in federal prison, Ted Kaczynski, widely known as "The Unabomber," committed suicide on June 10, 2023.⁴⁵ After surveying his life of seclusion and infamy, it is nearly indisputable that Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber, held anarchistic views. Examples such as his belief in the value of primitive societies, the need to return to the natural state of man, and the necessity of removing capitalism and the state ultimately depict Kaczynski as an anarchistic figure. Though there are some inconsistencies in his writings and actions, like the unrevolutionary characteristic of some of his bombings, one cannot deny, after surveying the presented

⁴⁰ "The Unabomber Manifesto," 75.

⁴¹ *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill*, 400.

⁴² Kaczynski, Ted. "Letter to a Turkish Anarchist." The Anarchist Library.

⁴³ Kaczynski, Ted. "Ted Kaczynski's Interview with the John Jay Sentinel." The Anarchist Library.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Balsamo, Mike, Jake Offenhartz, and Michael R. Sisak. "'unabomber' Ted Kaczynski Died by Suicide in Prison Medical Center, AP Sources Say." AP News, June 11, 2023.

evidence, that Kaczynski possessed anarchistic sympathies and a worldview akin to the anarcho-primitivists. Ted Kaczynski was not merely an anarchistic thinker who shared some ideas with the classical anarchists, but rather a full-fledged anarcho-primitivist who put forward ideas typical of the anarcho-primitivism movements, albeit in a much bloodier fashion.

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